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April 19: Freedom's Birthday

by Scott McPherson

Americans revere a great number of dates that hold special significance for their culture and history. The Fourth of July, Veterans Day, the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. — a quick glance through any calendar provides numerous other examples.

Yet the one day of most importance, to both the nation and its culture, is the one that is conspicuously absent from any mention of notable historical dates. No parades honor the fallen; no speeches in Congress remind us of their deeds; no wreaths are laid; no moments of silence requested.

On this sacred date no president will stand on hallowed ground to remind the American people of the important lessons of the nation's founding: dedication to freedom — and the example of that principle borne out in dramatic practice.

The day Americans should mark on their calendar every year is April 19. On that day, 229 years ago, patriot militiamen from the New England countryside rose up against brute force, tyranny, and oppression. In so doing, they propelled from theory into vivid reality a revolutionary idea: the supremacy of the individual over government.

The story begins, of course, long before the actual day itself. For years tensions had been increasing between the North American colonials and their masters in the British government. Disputes over taxes and other British policies had resulted in protests, riots, and boycotts. The Stamp Act, the Revenue Act, the "Boston Massacre," and the climactic Boston Tea Party were the culmination of a decade of growing conflict. As a result, the city of Boston was garrisoned with large numbers of British troops and its harbor was sealed off to prevent trade under the Boston Port Act, impoverishing the city, and further angering the colonials.

Resentment of tyranny mounts

In July 1774, Thomas Jefferson penned *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* in response to the government's oppressive measures. "Single acts of tyranny may be ascribed to the accidental opinion of the day," he wrote, "but a series of oppressions, begun at a

distinguished period, and pursued unalterably thro' every change of ministers, too plainly prove a deliberate, systematical plan of reducing us to slavery.”

The colonials, particularly those in Boston, had tasted the bit of heavy-handed government and found it not at all to their liking.

Attempts to bully the colonials into submitting to British designs were not, however, confined to occupation troops, taxes, and trade laws. In his book *A Right to Bear Arms*, noted Second Amendment scholar and lawyer Stephen P. Halbrook writes,

The last part of 1774 through the first half of 1775 was characterized by systematic British attempts to disarm the Americans.... In September 1774, the Crown-appointed counselors of Boston considered banning possession of arms by the people, leading to widespread protests.

Militia stores were confiscated in Massachusetts and Virginia; in Virginia, George Mason and George Washington formed the Fairfax County Militia Association. Interestingly, they were explicitly aware of the quasi-illegal nature of their actions, noting that “our governors forbid giving assent to militia laws,” making it “high time that we enter into *associations* for learning the use of arms, and to choose officers.”

In South Carolina, a militant writer suggested that “the inhabitants of this colony ... ought ... never to be without the most ample supply of arms and ammunition” and that they should ready themselves “for the defence of this valuable country.” Philadelphia raised five regiments of militia. A resident of the city, Joseph Barroll, wrote to a friend in England, “We are ready to die free, but determined not to live slaves.... *Oppression will make a wise man mad*; you will soon be made acquainted with the Spirit of the times.”

In New England, as elsewhere, conditions were reaching a boiling point. Tensions between government officials and colonial agitators were rising toward inevitable conflict. In May 1774, Parliament passed laws removing the last vestiges of popular control of the colony of Massachusetts, including, according to John Galvin in *The Minute Men*, “the right to name the Governor’s Council, to elect judges, sheriffs, and justices of the peace, to summon juries, and to hold town meetings.”

Furthermore, “Colonists accused of crimes could be carried out of Massachusetts to Admiralty Courts in Halifax, Nova Scotia, for trial. Few acts,” concludes Galvin, “could have done more to destroy hope for a peaceful settlement of differences.”

August 1774 brought an angry letter from Gen. Thomas Gage, the newly appointed governor of Massachusetts, to his superior, Lord Dartmouth, in England:

In Worcester they keep no terms; openly threatening resistance by arms; have been purchasing arms; preparing them; casting balls; and providing powder; and threaten to attack any troops who dare to oppose them.

Worse, 2,000 armed colonial militiamen had marched on the common in Worcester on August 26 to demonstrate their resistance to royal judges taking their seats there the following month.

On September 1, Gage ordered 260 soldiers to secure the “King’s powder” held in the Quarry Hill arsenal in Charlestown — the patriot towns in the surrounding area had already withdrawn their stores — and the move caused an uproar among the colonials. The government had demonstrated its willingness to act decisively against threats of rebellion.

Yet colonial anger only mounted. When the court at Worcester was due to open on September 6, 6,000 militiamen under arms stood ready to prevent it and if necessary fight against the king’s soldiers. None arrived. Worried about the “flames of sedition” that had “spread universally throughout the country, beyond conception,” Gage was obliged to stand down and allow British law to be successfully challenged by armed force.

Galvin writes “For the first time many provincials began to believe that a revolution was indeed possible,” providing further impetus to a growing movement of organized armed resistance to the British Crown.

Right through the autumn and winter of 1774 and the spring of 1775 the two sides prepared for hostilities. The patriots continued to arm themselves and form independent militia companies. Meanwhile British troops continually marched around Massachusetts in “show of force” operations designed to intimidate the colonials and weaken their determination to resist the government. Instead, these actions only strengthened patriot resolve to be prepared, should the need arise, to defend against any clear aggression.

That opportunity would present itself in April. The fourth of that month brought news from London that more troops were en route to reinforce Boston and that Parliament had declared the province to be in a state of rebellion. Gage was under pressure to force the rebels into a fight. Dartmouth had written to him that the colonial militiamen were merely “a rude rabble without plan, without concert, and without conduct,” intending for Gage to press a military solution to American resistance.

Lexington and Concord

Receiving word of large stocks of military supplies being hidden in the village of Concord, roughly 20 miles from Boston, Gage saw his chance to strike a major blow against the growing rebellion. Forming an expeditionary force of around 700 men, to be led by Lt. Col. Francis Smith, Gage ordered that the militia stockpiles in Concord be seized and destroyed. The troops moved

out from their Boston garrison at around 9 p.m. on April 18, crossing the Charles River and heading into the countryside.

Naturally, British movements did not go unnoticed. Patriot riders Paul Revere and William Dawes were given the signal from Boston's Old North Church to warn the surrounding towns and villages, and news spread fast of the army's march. Militia leaders had begun mustering their men by early in the morning of April 19, as the British soldiers were well on their way towards Concord.

In Lexington, Capt. John Parker gathered his men. Their plan was to form on the village green but not interfere with the British march unless attempts were made to damage the town or harass its inhabitants. Seventy-six militia members formed into ranks and awaited the army's arrival.

They came shortly after sunrise — and marched right into the midst of the vastly outnumbered colonials. The lead officer in the British ranks, Major Pitcairn, shouted at the militia, “Ye villains, ye rebels disperse! Lay down your arms!” As the British soldiers moved to surround them, several of the colonials fired, only to be devastated by a return barrage from the British light infantry. The soldiers then went berserk, firing mercilessly into the militia lines without orders. When their officers regained control, eight Americans lay dead and nine wounded. Within half an hour, the army was marching on to Concord.

Like wildfire, news of the bloodshed at Lexington spread to surrounding communities, and more and more militia companies started on their way to intercept the British. None among the soldiers could know that Middlesex County, of which Concord was the geographical center, boasted 6,000 organized militia fighters prepared to respond on a moment's notice — but they soon would. Before the day was through, approximately 14,000 militiamen would be swarming like hornets around the unsuspecting British force.

Marching into Concord around 8 a.m., the soldiers began their search for the militia provisions hidden there, and moved to hold several strategic positions in and around the village. As this took place, colonial militiamen began taking position on the outskirts of the town.

A militia unit under Col. James Barrett faced three companies of soldiers at the Old North Bridge. At around 10:30 a.m. one of Barrett's adjutants saw a plume of smoke rising from the center of Concord (the stores had finally been found). “Will you let them burn the town?” the adjutant asked his commander. The Americans mistook the smoke as a sign of general plundering. Naturally, this lent a greater sense of urgency to the need for decisive action.

Colonel Barrett then ordered his men to march over the bridge and into the town. Alarmed by the large number of armed men approaching, the British soldiers retreated across the bridge and prepared to defend it, tearing up planks to prevent the militia from crossing the bridge after them. When the militia came to within 75 yards of the British ranks, the soldiers fired on the militia, killing two men instantly and wounding three others. The colonials responded with a

volley of their own, wounding four British officers, a sergeant, and six privates (two fatally). Falling back in confusion, the soldiers fled the field of battle, leaving the bridge in the hands of the militia.

Things were not looking good for the British. On the ridges and hills surrounding Concord, Colonel Smith saw that the force opposing him was growing larger and larger with each passing minute. “Every time Colonel Smith brought his glass to bear on the hill beyond the North Bridge,” notes Galvin, “the force of rebels there seemed to have grown.... On the south side of town ... armed rebels in large numbers — at least 100 of them, possibly more — had crossed the South Bridge and were moving through the swampy ground” to take up tactical positions. After much maneuvering, the colonel gathered his troops and prepared to make haste back to Boston, lest his relatively small force be consumed by the (now) vastly superior numbers gathering to oppose them.

For several hours more the battle would rage. Marching through the towns they had encountered on the way up to Concord, the British faced a far different situation on their return journey. Racing ahead of the column, colonial units took up positions in houses and behind walls along the road and fired into the British ranks.

The fighting was at close range, and brutal. The historian Page Smith, in *A New Age Now Begins*, writes that on the way back to Boston the British were “harassed at every step by New England militia and, indeed, by every farmer with a gun, who fired at them from the houses that lined the road and from behind the tree stumps and fences.... Every mile was paid for in British dead and wounded.”

Colonel Smith’s tattered units were saved only by a large relief column armed with cannon hurriedly sent out from Boston. Were it not for those reinforcements, the militia would have completely overwhelmed his force. In fact, despite reinforcements the British were still aware of their precarious situation and continued their retreat.

Back in Boston, they took stock of themselves: in all, 73 soldiers killed and 174 wounded — more than 30 percent casualties. The Americans had exacted a heavy toll. Making matters worse, more than 20,000 militiamen now held Boston under siege. Following the battle, one soldier wrote home, “I cannot be sure when you will get another letter from me, as this extensive continent is all in arms against us.”

The Revolution had begun.

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